



Taoism - The Wu-Wei Principle, Part 4

by Ted Kardash

This is the fourth in a series of articles on Taoism, a Chinese philosophical tradition whose roots extend back to 3000 B.C.

The essential message of Taoism is that life constitutes an organic, interconnected whole which undergoes constant transformation.

This unceasing flow of change manifests itself as a natural order governed by unalterable, yet perceivable laws. Paradoxically, it is the constancy of these governing principles (like the rising and setting of the sun and moon and the changing of the seasons) that allows people to recognize and utilize them in their own process of transformation. Gaining an awareness of life's essential unity and learning to cooperate with its natural flow and order enables people to attain a state of being that is both fully free and independent and at the same time fully connected to the life flow of the Universe - being at one with the Tao. From the Taoist viewpoint this represents the ultimate stage of human existence.

The writings of the legendary Taoist sages, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, furnish us with specific principles as a guide to attaining this state of oneness. Through understanding these principles and applying them to daily living we may consciously become a part of life's flow.

A key principle in realizing our oneness with the Tao is that of wu-wei, or "non-doing." Wu-wei refers to behavior that arises from a sense of oneself as connected to others and to one's environment. It is not motivated by a sense of separateness. It is action that is spontaneous and effortless. At the same time it is not to be considered inertia, laziness, or mere passivity. Rather, it is the experience of going with the grain or swimming with the current. Our contemporary expression, "going with the flow," is a direct expression of this fundamental Taoist principle, which in its most basic form refers to behavior occurring in response to the flow of the Tao.

The principle of wu-wei contains certain implications. Foremost among these is the need to consciously experience ourselves as part of the unity of life that is the Tao. Lao Tzu writes that we must be quiet and watchful, learning to listen to both our own inner voices and to the voices of our environment in a non-interfering, receptive manner. In this way we also learn to rely on more than just our intellect and logical mind to gather and assess information. We develop and trust our intuition as our direct connection to the Tao. We heed the intelligence of our whole body, not only our brain. And we learn through our own experience. All of this allows us to respond readily to the needs of the environment, which of course includes ourselves. And just as the Tao functions in a manner to promote harmony and balance, our own actions, performed in the spirit of wu-wei, produce the same result.

Wu-wei also implies action that is spontaneous, natural, and effortless. As with the Tao, this behavior simply flows through us because it is the right action, appropriate to its time and place, and serving the purpose of greater harmony and balance. Chuang Tzu refers to this type of being in the world as flowing, or more poetically (and provocatively), as "purposeless wandering!" How opposite this concept is to some of our most cherished cultural values. To have no purpose is



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unthinkable and even frightening, certainly anti-social and perhaps pathological in the context of modern day living. And yet it would be difficult to maintain that our current values have promoted harmony and balance, either environmentally or on an individual level.

To allow oneself to "wander without purpose" can be frightening because it challenges some of our most basic assumptions about life, about who we are as humans, and about our role in the world. From a Taoist point of view it is our cherished beliefs - that we exist as separate beings, that we can exercise willful control over all situations, and that our role is to conquer our environment - that lead to a state of disharmony and imbalance. Yet, "the Tao nourishes everything," Lao Tzu writes. If we can learn to follow the Tao, practicing non-action," then nothing remains undone. This means trusting our own bodies, our thoughts and emotions, and also believing that the environment will provide support and guidance. Thus the need to develop watchfulness and quietness of mind.

In cultivating wu-wei, timing becomes an important aspect of our behavior. We learn to perceive processes in their earliest stages and thus are able to take timely action. "Deal with the small before it becomes large," is a well-known dictum from Lao Tzu.

And finally, in the words of Chuang Tzu, we learn "detachment, forgetfulness of results, and abandonment of all hope of profit." By allowing the Tao to work through us, we render our actions truly spontaneous, natural, and effortless. We thus flow with all experiences and feelings as they come and go. We know intuitively that actions which are not ego-motivated, but in response to the needs of the environment, lead toward harmonious balance and give ultimate meaning and "purpose" to our lives. Such actions are attuned to the deepest flow of life itself.

To allow wu-wei to manifest in our lives may seem like a daunting task. And yet, if we pause to reflect on our past experiences, we will recall possibly many instances when our actions were spontaneous and natural, when they arose out of the needs of the moment without thought of profit or tangible result. "The work is done and then forgotten. And so it lasts forever," writes Lao Tzu.

By listening carefully within, as well as to our surroundings, by remembering that we are part of an interconnected whole, by remaining still until action is called forth, we can perform valuable, necessary, and long-lasting service in the world while cultivating our ability to be at one with the Tao. Such is the power of wu-wei, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Tao.

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